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ABSTRACT

This research summarizes the results of a study involving 835 inmates in six major correctional facilities within several states and 758 inner-city students from 10 high schools near the facilities, concerning the number and types of firearms juveniles possess as well as where, how, and why juveniles acquire and carry firearms. Research focused on serious juvenile offenders and on inner-city students because these groups are popularly thought to engage in and experience violence at rates exceeding those of most other groups. Among the findings are: (1) 83 percent of inmates and 22 percent of the students possessed guns, usually powerful revolvers or automatic and semiautomatic handguns; (2) most surveyed thought it would be easy to acquire a gun; (3) 45 percent of the inmates and 53 percent of the students would acquire their guns by "borrowing" from family or friends, and 54 percent of the inmates and 37 percent of the students said they would get one "off the street"; (4) drug use was moderately related to gun activity; and (5) the main reason given for owning or carrying a gun was self-protection. The report suggests that, from the viewpoint of policy, the problem to be addressed has less to do with where juveniles get their guns, but more importantly, combating the idea they have that a gun is needed to survive in their neighborhoods. (Contains 15 references.) (GLR)

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National Institute of Justice
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Research in Brief

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ED 368 838

Gun Acquisition and Possession in Selected Juvenile Samples

by Joseph F. Sheley, Ph.D., and James D. Wright, Ph.D.

Violence committed by and against juveniles has come increasingly to define the public's image of the crime problem and the larger political debate over anticrime policy. While evidence documenting the growth of youth violence is abundant, systematic research on the *means* and *methods* of this violence is scarce.

This Research in Brief summarizes the results of a study concerning the number and types of firearms juveniles possess as well as where, how, and why juveniles acquire and carry firearms. The findings derive from responses to surveys completed by *selected* samples of male inmates (mostly from urban areas) in juvenile correctional facilities in California, New Jersey, Louisiana, and Illinois and male students in 10 inner-city public high schools near the correctional institutions surveyed.

The research focused on serious juvenile offenders and on inner-city students because these groups are popularly thought to engage in and experience violence at rates exceeding those of most other groups.[1] The sites chosen reflect the few instances in which the researchers gained dual entry into both a State's juvenile correction system and at least one adjacent, urban, local school district within a reasonably parallel time period.

Issues and Findings

Discussed in this Research in Brief: Results of a study of juvenile possession of firearms drawn from voluntary questionnaires anonymously completed by:

- 835 male serious offenders incarcerated in 6 juvenile correctional facilities in 4 States.
- 758 male students in 10 inner-city high schools near the facilities.

Both students and inmates came from environments marked by crime and violence.

Key issues: Researchers sought to find out the number and types of arms owned and where, how, and why they were obtained. Because the study focused on serious juvenile offenders and students from schools in high-risk areas, the results are not generalizable to the entire U.S. population.

Key Findings: The study found that:

- 83 percent of inmates and 22 percent of the students possessed guns.
- 55 percent of inmates carried guns all or most of the time in the year or two before being incarcerated; 12 percent of the students did so, with another 23 percent carrying guns now and then.
- The firearms of choice were high-quality, powerful revolvers, closely followed by automatic and semiautomatic handguns and then shotguns.
- Most of those surveyed thought it would be easy to acquire a gun. Only 13 percent of inmates and 35 percent of students said it would be a lot of trouble or nearly impossible.
- When asked how they would get a gun, 45 percent of the inmates and 53 percent of the students would "borrow" one from family or friends; 54 percent of the inmates and 37 percent of the students said they would get one "off the street."
- Fewer inmates and students said they used hard drugs than expected (43 percent of inmates and 5 to 6 percent of students). Drug use was moderately related to gun activity.
- More inmates than students reported selling drugs (72 percent of inmates and 18 percent of students). Those who were involved in selling drugs had higher levels of gun ownership and use than those who were not.
- The main reason given for owning or carrying a gun was self-protection.

The researchers conclude that the fundamental policy problem involves convincing youths they can survive in their neighborhoods without being armed.

Target audience: Law enforcement administrators, school officials, juvenile justice practitioners, researchers, and community groups who work with youth.

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A number of schools and neighborhoods can be dangerous places for many young people in America. Knives, revolvers, and even shotguns regularly turn up in searches of school lockers. News reports describe incidents of children being shot on playgrounds or of youths firing rifles as they cruise the streets in cars. The use of weapons in violent incidents has increased fear among citizens of all ages.

In looking for solutions, school administrators and local criminal and juvenile justice officials seek more information about juveniles' use of firearms. To that end, the National Institute of Justice, with joint funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention—two bureaus within the Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs—commissioned a study to learn more about the level and nature of juvenile gun possession in high-risk neighborhoods. The researchers asked students in high schools that had experienced a large number of violent incidents, as well as male juveniles involved in serious offenses, about the weapons they carried, why they carried them, and how they acquired them.

The reader should note, however, that the study focused on high-risk areas and an at-risk population. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable, but the data shed new light on a complex problem.

The findings discussed in this report are sobering. For example, many students surveyed in this study claimed they carried firearms to protect themselves from fellow students and had little trouble obtaining the weapons. This report raises serious issues that concern all who are working to diminish violence and crime in our neighborhoods. It should be helpful to those developing policies and strategies to combat the threats to public safety posed by juveniles who illegally carry guns.

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Method

A total of 835 inmates in 6 of the respective States' major correctional facilities (3 in California, 1 each in the remaining States) completed self-administered questionnaires in the spring of 1991. Each site was a standard State facility to which seriously troublesome youth were remanded. The offenses characterizing the inmates in these sites ranged from drug-related crimes (generally trafficking in drugs) to homicide. All but the New Jersey site, whose inmates had profiles like those of inmates in the other institutions, were maximum security facilities (completely enclosed, guarded, razorwired). The institutions' populations ranged from 172 to 850. The percentage of inmates surveyed per institution ranged from 22 to 62 (primarily a function of size of institution), with a mean of 41 percent.

The survey was introduced to the inmates as a national study of firearms and violence among youth. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were given $5 to participate in the project. In all of the correctional facilities in question, administrators announced the study to inmates in all of the smaller facilities' dormitories and to those in about half of the dormitories in the larger facilities. The researchers then discussed the project with them. An average of 95 percent of the inmates addressed by the researchers agreed to participate in the study. At each site, groups of 10 to 20 inmates at a time completed the questionnaire.

In all cases, local high school administrators viewed the topic of guns and violence among students as politically charged. They consented to the research only on the guarantee that their districts and schools would not be identified in the publication of the research results. Responses were obtained from schools in large prominent cities near the correctional facilities serving as research sites. Enrollments in these schools ranged from 900 to 2,100.

Schools selected for study were identified by local school board officials as inner-city schools that had experienced firearms incidents in the recent past and whose students likely encountered gun-related violence (as victims, perpetrators, or bystanders) out of school. No formal evidence is available by which to document these claims. However, interviews with the faculty and students of these schools during the administration of the survey confirmed the administrators' assessments. In one school, surveyors observed a student taking a gun from his jacket to examine it before responding to a questionnaire item about caliber. Moreover, in the time since administration of the survey, four of the schools have experienced violent episodes sufficient to gain national media attention.

The survey was introduced to students as it was to the inmates—as a voluntary and anonymous national study of firearms and violence among youth. Spanish versions of the survey were offered to students who desired them. Principals were asked to grant the researchers access to 150 to 200 students in each of the schools entered and, within the practical constraints faced by principals and teachers, to make the sample—students in grades 9 through 12—as representative of their pupils as possible.

In six instances, principals arranged for the survey to take place during homeroom periods. These periods were uniform for the student body; thus, theoretically, the study had access to the entire student population. In two schools, the survey was given during the physical education hours, and in two schools, access was given to all students enrolled in social studies courses. In the former two sites, physical education was mandatory and its hours were uniform for all students; thus, here too, the study theoretically had access to all students. In the latter two sites access to the entire student body was more limited. Approximately 95 percent of students addressed by the researchers participated in the study.

The number of students surveyed was 758, an average of 165 per school (within a range of 109 to 229). The percentage of student populations surveyed across schools ranged from 7 to 21 (with a mean of 10 percent; lower percentages were a function of larger schools). In some

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schools, the survey was administered to groups of 20 to 30 students at a time. In others, it was given to larger assemblies of 100 to 200 students. In 4 of the 10 schools sampled, students were offered $5 to participate in the survey. Neither financial inducement nor method of distribution more generally was tied to the percentage of the student body participating in the survey or to response variation across questionnaire items.

Validity, completeness, and consistency issues

With respect to sites more generally, responses to the questionnaire items displayed some variation across correctional facilities, as expected, but reflected no systematic site-to-site patterns. Site differences that did occur could most often be reduced to a single site at variance with the others concerning a given item; no one site appeared conspicuously at odds across all items.

Missing data were expected given that the survey was long, that time limits were imposed on some respondents by their institutions, and that respondents had been told that answering any given item in the survey was discretionary. Despite this, the average percentage of inmate respondents who failed to complete both items in any set of randomly cross-tabulated items was only 1.41 percent (literally, one case) within a range of 0.11 to 4.1 percent; for students the corresponding figure was 3.1 percent within a range of 0.7 to 3.9 percent. Additionally, missing cases on the items used in the present analysis were contrasted with responding cases controlling for research site, race/ethnicity, and age. Missing and responding cases differed little. As a further check, all analyses reported below were rerun substituting predicted values for all missing cases.[2] The results were substantially unchanged.

Finally, though self-report data are absolutely necessary to studies such as this one, they inevitably raise issues of reliability and validity. Attempts to establish level of reliability in the present study centered on pairs of items, the responses to which were checked for logical consistency. For example, respondents who claimed never to have owned a military-style weapon at any time in their lives should not have responded affirmatively to a later item regarding ownership of such a weapon just prior to incarceration. Fourteen such items were examined for the inmate sample, and 11 were examined for the student sample. Inconsistent responses averaged only 2.4 percent within a range of 1.2 to 3.4 percent among the inmate respondents. For the students, they averaged 1.5 percent within a range of 0.7 to 3.1 percent.

To determine how systematic were the inconsistencies, each respondent was scored on the number of inconsistent answers. Inmate respondents received scores between 0 and 14; student respondents received scores between 0 and 11. Only 4 percent of the inmates scored above 2; no inmate scored above 6, and only one scored 6. Only 1 percent of the students scored above 2; no student score exceeded 4.

Validity was more difficult to assess, since there were no official records against which to compare the self-report data. However, indicative of construct validation, respondents who attributed respect from peers to ownership of a gun also felt that friends would look down on them if they did not carry a gun ($r = 0.638$ for inmates; 0.587 for students). The level of use of heroin, crack, and regular cocaine was associated with the extent of commission of property crimes to gain drug money (r ranges between 0.245 and 0.384 for inmates; between 0.395 and 0.453 for students)—a finding consistent with those of previous researchers.[3]

As has been reported previously,[4] marijuana seems to have served as a gateway drug to heroin, cocaine, and crack use for the respondents. Among the inmate users of heroin, cocaine, and crack, 79, 80, and 76 percent, respectively, had also used marijuana. Among the student users of heroin, cocaine, and crack, 76, 86, and 88 percent, respectively, had also used marijuana.

In sum, reliability levels seem far above what might be expected for respondents of the type surveyed in the present study and for the subject matter of interest here. Validity levels clearly fall within an acceptable range, but see "Caveat."

Characteristics of respondents

The average inmate respondent's age was 17, and 84 percent of inmates were nonwhite. The modal educational attainment level was 10th grade. More than half of the inmates were from cities of at least 250,000 residents. Half had committed robbery; two-thirds had committed burglary. Among the students, 97 percent

Caveat

It should be stressed that these findings are technically not generalizable to other settings and populations. The four States serving as research sites for this study were not a probability sample of States. Moreover, to maximize percentages of respondents involved in the behaviors of interest, the study purposely focused on serious juvenile offenders and on students from especially problematic inner-city schools. Therefore, the 6 correctional facilities and 10 high schools (and by virtue of the voluntary nature of participation in the study, the respondents in those institutions) serving as research sites were not probability samples of their respective universes.

Nonetheless, comparison of inmate respondents' profiles with those known through studies of youth in similar institutions indicates that the present sample was not dissimilar to samples of State maximum-security wards serving as subjects of other studies.[6] Moreover, a 1984 study of inner-city high school students' criminal activity employed data collected from randomly selected high school students from inner-city, high-crime neighborhoods in four cities[7] and indicated age and race breakdowns very similar to those found among the student respondents.

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were nonwhite, and the mean age was 16. The modal educational attainment level also was 10th grade. All of the student respondents were from cities with populations exceeding 250,000. As expected, the student sample was far less involved in criminal activities. Still, 42 percent of the students reported having been arrested or picked up by the police at least once; 22 percent had been arrested or picked up "many" times; 23 percent reported having stolen something worth at least $50. Nine percent reported using a weapon to commit a crime.

Exposure to guns and violence

Prior to examining the gun-related behaviors of the respondents, one had to place those behaviors in a larger social context. Inmates and students alike inhabited social worlds characterized by crime and violence. Four in 10 inmates had siblings who had also been incarcerated, and 47 percent had siblings who owned guns legally or illegally. More generally, 79 percent of the inmates came from families in which at least some of the males owned guns; 62 percent had male family members who routinely *carried* guns outside the home. The pattern was even sharper with respect to the peers of the incarcerated juveniles. Nine out of 10 inmates had at least some friends and associates who owned and carried guns routinely.

Thus, in the street environment inhabited by these juvenile offenders, owning and carrying guns were virtually universal behaviors. Further, in this same environment, the inmate respondents regularly experienced threats of violence and violence itself. A total of 84 percent reported that they had been threatened with a gun or shot at during their lives. Half had been stabbed with a knife.

If the social world of the student sample was less dangerous or hostile, it was only by comparison to that of the inmates. A total of 69 percent of the students had males in their families who owned guns. Two out of five reported that males in their families routinely carried guns outside the home. Gun owning and carrying were also common among the friends of the student respondents. More than half (57 percent) of the respondents had friends who owned guns; 42 percent had friends who routinely carried guns outside the home.

Like members of the inmate sample, the student respondents were also frequently threatened and victimized by violence. Forty-five percent had been threatened with a gun or shot at on the way to or from school in the previous few years. One in 10 had been stabbed, and 1 in 3 had been beaten up in or on the way to school. Nearly a fifth (17 percent) had been wounded with some form of weapon other than a knife or a gun in or near the school.

Victimization aside, the study data also permit some comment concerning violence in the inner-city schools in which the students were surveyed. Nearly a quarter (22 percent) of the surveyed students reported that carrying weapons to school was common. Nearly half (47 percent) personally knew schoolmates at whom shots had been fired in the previous few years. Fifteen percent personally knew someone who had carried a weapon to school; 8 percent personally knew someone who had brought a gun to school.

The reality of violence in the respondents' worlds shaped or was shaped by their attitudes about violence. Both samples were asked a series of questions about when they felt it was acceptable ("okay") to shoot someone. Response possibilities were "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," and "strongly agree." A total of 35 percent of the inmates and 10 percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that "it is okay to shoot a person if that is what it takes to get something you want." Was it "okay to shoot some guy who doesn't belong in your neighborhood?" Twenty-nine percent of the inmates and 10 percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that it was. Elements of insult and injury inevitably increased the perceived acceptance of violent responses. It was considered "okay [agree or strongly agree] to shoot someone who hurts or insults you" by 61 percent of the inmates and 28 percent of the students.

Gun possession

The media depiction of the firearms environment for juveniles is one in which guns of all types, even sophisticated military-style weapons, are widely and easily available. The average inner-city youth seemingly needs only to approach a street source, pay but a few dollars, and depart with a firearm. However, no one has systematically documented any of these per-

Table 1. **Inmate and Student Gun Possession (numbers in parentheses)**

	Percent of Inmates Who Owned Just Prior to Confinement	Percent of Students Who Owned at Time of Survey
Any type of gun	83 (815)	22 (741)
Target or hunting rifle	22 (823)	8 (728)
Military-style automatic or semiautomatic rifle	35 (823)	6 (728)
Regular shotgun	39 (823)	10 (728)
Sawed-off shotgun	51 (823)	9 (728)
Revolver	58 (823)	15 (728)
Automatic or semiautomatic handgun	55 (823)	18 (728)
Derringer or single-shot handgun	19 (822)	4 (727)
Homemade (zip) handgun	6 (823)	4 (727)
Three or more guns	65 (815)	15 (741)

ceptions, especially with respect to the *types* of guns youth are obtaining. Table 1 presents findings concerning gun possession among members of both samples; at least with respect to the inmate group, the media depiction is largely accurate. A total of 83 percent of the inmates owned at least one firearm just prior to their confinement (67 percent acquired their first gun by age 14). Two-thirds (65 percent) owned at least three firearms just before being jailed. Nearly a quarter of the students (22 percent) possessed a gun at the time the survey was completed. Six percent reported owning three or more guns at the time of the survey.

Carrying guns

Obviously, one need not actually own a gun in order to carry one. Since most of the incarcerated juveniles in the sample (83 percent) owned a gun of their own at the time of their arrest, the distinction may be relatively meaningless for them. But it is easy to imagine high school students who carry guns they do not own (for example, guns that have been borrowed from or otherwise made available by friends and family members, possibly guns that are jointly owned by multiple students). It is possible, in other words, that focusing on ownership results in an *under*estimation of the number of guns in the hands of the students in the study.

In fact, among the inmate sample, carrying a firearm was about as common as owning one; 55 percent carried a gun "all" or "most of the time" in the year or two before being incarcerated, and 84 percent carried a gun at least "now and then," with the latter figure nearly identical to the percentage who owned a gun. Among the student sample, carrying a gun at least occasionally was *more common* than gun ownership. A total of 22 percent of the students owned a gun at the time of the survey; 12 percent of them reported currently carrying a gun "all" or "most of the time," and another 23 percent did so at least "now and then," for a combined percentage of *35 percent who carried firearms regularly or occasionally*. Thus, by this more liberal measure, guns were in the hands of one out of three male central-city high school students surveyed. Beyond this, 3 percent of the students reported carrying a gun *to school* "all" or "most of the time"; an additional 6 percent did so "now and then."

Firearms of choice

Considerable media attention has been given recently to automatic and military-style weapons in the hands of youth. The findings presented in table 1 permit assessment of this problem. In that table, automatic and semiautomatic weapons (rifles and handguns that automatically place a new round into the firing chamber) are treated in combination because the study's aim was simply to distinguish rapid-fire arms from traditional arms.

Among the inmate respondents, the revolver was the most commonly owned firearm; 58 percent owned a revolver at the time of their present incarceration. These were not small handguns. The most common calibers among the most recently owned handguns of this sample were the 0.38 and the 0.357. Closely following the revolver in popularity were automatic and semiautomatic handguns, typically chambered for 9mm or 0.45 caliber rounds; 55 percent owned one at the time of their incarceration.

The shotgun, whether sawed-off or unaltered, also represented a major weapon of choice. More than half the sample (51 percent) had possessed such a weapon; 39 percent had owned a regular shotgun. (A bit fewer than half the inmates, 47 percent, reported that they personally had cut down a shotgun or rifle to make it easier to carry or conceal at some point in their lives.) Next in popularity were the military-style automatic and semiautomatic rifles that have figured so prominently in recent media accounts. More than a third of the inmates (35 percent) owned one at the time they went to prison. Other types of guns—regular hunting rifles, derringers, zip guns, etc.—found little favor; fewer than a quarter said they owned this type of firearm when they were incarcerated.

Table 1 shows similar patterns of ownership, although on a considerably diminished scale, for the high school students. The most commonly owned weapon was the automatic or semiautomatic handgun (18 percent), followed by the revolver (15 percent). Shoulder weapons of all sorts were less likely to be owned by the students than were handguns; still, 9 percent owned a sawed-off shotgun, 10 percent an unmodified shotgun, and 6 percent a military-style rifle.

Absent additional data, it is hard to be certain which aspects of the pattern of ownership reflected preferences and which aspects reflected availability. Considering the ease with which the juveniles obtained firearms and the number and variety of guns apparently in circulation in their communities (see below), it is a reasonable assumption that they carried what they preferred to carry and that differential availability had little or nothing to do with it. There was an evident preference for concealable firearms (handguns and sawed-off shotguns), but hard-to-conceal shoulder weapons, whether military-style or not, were also quite common.

To gain some sense of what juveniles seek in a weapon, the study asked respondents (both samples) what features they considered "very important" in a handgun. The profile of desirable features was remarkably similar in both groups. Among inmates, the three highest rated traits were firepower, quality of construction, and untraceability, followed by ease of firing and accuracy. Among the students, quality of construction was the highest rated trait, followed by being easy to shoot, accurate, and untraceable. Neither inmates nor students indicated much preference for small, cheap guns, nor were they attracted to such ephemeral characteristics of weapons as "scary looking" or "good looking." The preference, clearly, was for hand weapons that were well-made, accurate, easy to shoot, and not easily traced.

Obtaining a gun

Media accounts suggest that most types of guns are relatively abundant and readily accessible to juveniles. In fact, 70 percent of the inmates felt that upon release they could get a gun with "no trouble at all," a sentiment expressed by 41 percent of the

students as well. An additional 17 percent of the inmates and 24 percent of the male students said it would be "only a little trouble." Only 13 percent of the inmates and 35 percent of the students perceived access to guns as a "lot of trouble" or "nearly impossible."

We also asked both groups of respondents how they would go about getting a gun if they desired one. Most felt there were numerous ways but that family, friends, and street sources were the main sources (see table 2). Forty-five percent of the inmates and 53 percent of the students would "borrow" a gun from a family member or friend. Thirty-six percent and 35 percent of the inmates and students, respectively, would "buy" one from family or friends. Half of the inmates (54 percent) and a third of the students (37 percent) would "get one off the street."

Drug dealers and addicts were the major suppliers after family, friends, and other street sources, this for both inmates (35 percent) and students (22 percent). Purchasing a gun at a gunshop (or asking someone else to do so (see below) was perceived by 28 percent of the students as a reliable method; only 12 percent of the inmates considered it so (or viewed it as necessary). Theft was twice as likely to be mentioned by the inmates as by the students although, relative to other sources, it was prominent for neither group.

By way of partial confirmation of these findings (also see table 2), when asked where they *actually had obtained* (bought, borrowed, or stolen) the most recent handgun they had ever possessed, more than half of the inmates who had possessed handguns checked a friend (30 percent) or street source (22 percent). Only 6 percent listed family member as the source. Drug dealers and drug addicts were the sources of 21 percent of the guns. The picture differed somewhat for the students. Friends (38 percent) and street sources (14 percent) were important, but family members (23 percent) were also primary sources. Drug dealers and addicts were rarer sources (8 percent).

The two sets of findings in table 2, then, point to illegal and fairly close sources of guns; if family or friends could not supply a gun, an apparently abundant blackmarket network could be found on the street.

While relatively few inmates mentioned theft as a means to obtain a gun upon release, far more had actually stolen guns, usually from homes or cars. More than half had stolen a gun at least once in their lives. In contrast, only 8 percent of the students had ever stolen a gun. Most of the thefts involved revolvers (50 percent of the inmates), but substantial numbers of inmates reported stealing other types of guns: shotguns (41 percent), automatic or semiautomatic handguns (44 percent), and military-style rifles (30 percent). When the inmates sold or traded the guns they had stolen, they generally did so to friends or other trusted persons.

Thus, these juveniles both supplied guns to and obtained guns from an informal network of family, friends, and street sources. It seems likely, then, that theft and burglary were the ultimate source of many of the guns acquired by the juveniles surveyed, but only occasionally the proximate source. Buttressing this point, it was found that although half of the inmates had stolen guns at some time, only 24 percent had stolen their most recently obtained handgun.

Though by no means the preferred method of acquisition, purchasing a gun through legitimate channels was fairly common among respondents. Federal law bars juveniles from purchasing firearms through normal retail outlets, but the law is readily circumvented by persuading someone who is of legal age to make the purchase in one's behalf. A total of 32 percent of the inmates and 18 percent of the students had asked someone to purchase a gun for them in a gun shop, pawnshop, or other retail

Table 2. **Means of Obtaining Guns**

	Percent of Inmates	Percent of Students
Likely Source If Desired*	**(N = 738)**	**(N = 623)**
Steal from a person or car	14	7
Steal from a house or apartment	17	8
Steal from a store or pawnshop	8	4
Borrow from family member or friend	45	53
Buy from family member or friend	36	35
Get off the street	54	37
Get from a drug dealer	36	22
Get from an addict	35	22
Buy from gun shop	12	28
Source of Most Recent Handgun**	**(N = 640)**	**(N = 211)**
A friend	30	38
Family member	6	23
Gun shop/pawnshop	7	11
The street	22	14
Drug dealer	9	2
Drug addict	12	6
"Taken" from someone's house or car	12	2
Other	2	4

* Item: "How would you go about getting a gun if you decided you wanted one?" (Multiple responses permitted.)

** Item: "Where did you get your most recent handgun?" Respondents who owned handguns only.

outlet; 49 percent of the inmates and 52 percent of the students mentioned a friend as the person requested to buy a gun; and 14 percent of the inmates and 18 percent of the students had turned to family members. Only 7 percent and 6 percent of the inmates and students, respectively, had sought help from strangers.

It seems, then, that the inmates had access to an informal network that made gun acquisition cheaper and easier; turning to retail channels was possible but generally not necessary. Less streetwise and less hardened, perhaps, the students saw themselves as more dependent on the retail shop if they needed a gun, although only 18 percent had ever used that source.

Cost of a gun

Aside from convenience, there is another good reason why juveniles prefer informal and street sources over normal retail outlets. Guns obtained from informal and street sources are considerably less expensive. The substantial majority of handguns and conventional shoulder weapons obtained by juveniles in a cash transaction with an informal source were purchased for $100 or less; most of the military-style rifles obtained from such sources were purchased for $300 or less (table 3). Considering the general quality of the firearms in question (see above), the cash prices paid on the street were clearly much less than the normal cost paid by the relatively few respondents who obtained the guns through regular retail outlets.

Table 3. **Cost of Most Recent Firearm (for respondents who purchased gun for cash)***

Gun Type	Inmates			Students		
	Total	Retail	Informal	Total	Retail	Informal
Handguns						
Less than $50	41%	17%	21%	21%	0%	25%
$50–$100	24%	22%	48%	53%	27%	58%
More than $100	35%	61%	31%	26%	73%	17%
Number	**235**	**23**	**201**	**64**	**11**	**48**
Military-Style Rifles						
Less than $100	22%	28%	21%	28%	0%	29%
$100–$300	48%	7%	50%	21%	40%	45%
More than $300	30%	65%	29%	51%	60%	35%
Number	**165**	**14**	**151**	**38**	**5**	**31**
Rifles or Shotguns						
Less than $100	54%	32%	51%	47%	25%	52%
$100–$150	13%	14%	20%	29%	25%	28%
More than $150	33%	54%	29%	24%	50%	20%
Number	**153**	**19**	**134**	**30**	**4**	**25%**

*By way of interpretation of the results, of 235 inmates whose most recently acquired gun was a handgun paid for in cash, 41 percent paid $50 or less and 35 percent paid $100 or more; likewise, among 38 students whose most recently acquired gun was a military rifle that had been purchased for cash, 51 percent paid $300 or more for it. "Retail" means a gun shop, pawn shop, or other retail outlet; "informal" is a cash purchase from any other source.

The decision to carry a gun

The popular fear is that juveniles carry guns to prey on the rest of society. For the inmate sample, this fear is well-founded; 63 percent had committed crimes with guns. Forty percent had obtained a gun specifically for use in crime. Of those who reported committing "serious" crimes, 43 percent were "usually" or "always" armed with a gun during the process.

Use in crime, however, was not the most important factor in the decision to own or carry guns, either for inmates or students. Nor was the gun principally a totem whose primary function was to impress one's peers. Impressing peers or others was among the least important reasons for purchasing a gun, regardless of weapon type and for students and inmates equally.

Instead, reasons for carrying a gun were dominated by themes of self-protection and self-preservation. The most frequent circumstances in which inmates carried guns were when they were in a strange area (66 percent), when they were out at night (58 percent), and whenever they thought they might need self-protection (69 percent). Likewise, for any of the types of guns acquired by either inmates or students, the desire for protection and the need to arm oneself against enemies were the primary reasons to obtain a gun.

As the findings displayed in table 4 indicate, for example, 74 percent of the inmates who had obtained a handgun cited protection as a primary reason for their most recent purchase, and 52 percent cited armed enemies as a major factor. Use in crime (36 percent) and to "get someone" (37 percent) were relatively, though obviously not wholly, unimportant. The theme of self-protection was also evident in the circumstances in which the inmate respondents had actually fired their guns. Three-quarters had fired a gun at a person at least once. Sixty-nine percent had fired in what they considered self-defense. More than half had also fired shots during crimes and drug deals. Better than 6 in 10 had fired their weapons in fights and to scare someone.

Dealing guns

Given the means and sources of firearms acquisition for both inmates and high school students, it is obvious that there is a large, informal street market in guns, one in which the inmate respondents were regular suppliers as well as frequent consumers. Forty-five percent could be described as gun dealers in that they had

Table 4. **"Very Important" Reasons for Most Recent Gun Acquisition**

Gun Type	Percent Stating That Each Reason Was "Very Important"	
	Inmates	Students
Military-Style Guns	**(N = 365)**	**(N = 108)**
Protection	73	75
Enemies had guns	60	42
Use in crimes	40	(item not asked)
To get someone	43	25
Friends had one	20	16
To impress people	10	9
To sell	11	6
Handguns	**(N = 611)**	**(N = 210)**
Protection	74	70
Enemies had guns	52	28
Use in crimes	36	(item not asked)
To get someone	37	13
Friends had one	16	7
To impress people	10	10
To sell	10	4
Rifles or Shotguns	**(N = 523)**	**(N = 121)**
Protection	64	59
Enemies had guns	47	29
Use in crimes	35	(item not asked)
To get someone	37	20
Friends had one	16	5
To impress people	10	7
To sell	10	8

bought, sold, or traded a *lot* of guns. Of those who described themselves as dealers, the majority reported their most common source as theft from homes or cars and acquisitions from drug addicts. Sixteen percent had bought guns out-of-State for purposes of gun dealing; another 7 percent had done so in-State; and nearly 1 in 10 had stolen guns in quantity from stores or off trucks during shipment.

There were two very different types of "gun dealers" in the sample. One group (77 percent) comprised juveniles who occasionally came into possession of surplus firearms and then sold or traded them to street sources. They may have come across firearms in the course of burglaries or break-ins, or taken firearms from drug addicts in exchange for drugs, but they were not systematically in the business of gun dealing. The other group (23 percent) was more systematic in its gun-dealing activities and looked on gun deals as a business, seeking (if need be) to purchase guns both in- and out-of-State to supply their consumers. This group would include (one assumes) the one inmate in five who had gone (a few times or many times) to places with "very easy gun laws" to buy up guns for resale in his own neighborhoods. Those who had dealt guns, whether systematically or not, were more involved in gun use and criminal activity than those who had not dealt guns. They were more likely to carry a gun generally, more likely to own all types of weapons, more involved in shooting incidents, and more accepting of shooting someone to get something they wanted.

Drug use and gun activity

Much of the recent attention given to drugs and violence has centered on the use and sale of so-called hard drugs, specifically heroin, cocaine, and crack. Such drug use was not pervasive among the student respondents. Any use of hard drugs was reported by only 5 or 6 percent. Even among the inmates, percentages of users were moderate to low; only 43 percent had used cocaine, 25 percent crack, and 21 percent heroin. Combining results across types of drugs, complete abstinence from hard drugs was found to be characteristic of 93 percent of the high school students and 47 percent of the inmates. Further, the vast majority of users reported only occasional use.

With respect to the drugs-guns nexus, two important findings should be noted. First, substantial numbers of nonusers engaged in all the gun-related behaviors reported by respondents. For example, 72 percent of the inmates who had never used heroin had fired a gun at someone. A second and related finding is that inmate heroin users were generally more likely than nonusers to have been involved in most aspects of gun ownership and use, though the level of use among users was unrelated to the level of firearm activity. However, users of cocaine and crack were generally no more likely to have engaged in gun activity than nonusers. While the number of drug users among the students was too small to permit reliable analyses, the link between drugs and gun activity seemed more pronounced among members of this group.

Drug dealing and gun activity

The majority of inmates (72 percent) and a surprising percentage of high school students (18 percent) had either themselves dealt drugs or worked for someone who did. Firearms were a common element in the drug business. Among those who had dealt drugs or had worked for dealers, 89 percent of the inmates and 75 percent of the students had carried guns generally. Of the inmate dealers, 60 percent were very likely to carry guns during drug transactions, and 63 percent had fired guns during

those transactions. Moreover, 43 percent of the inmates reported that all or most of the drug dealers they knew also dealt in guns. Nearly half of the inmates who had ever stolen guns had also sold at least some of them to drug dealers. Six percent of those who had dealt guns had bought guns from drug dealers.

For inmate respondents, whether or not drug users, involvement in drug sales was associated with higher levels of every type of gun activity examined in this study. Student drug sellers reported higher levels of firearm activity than nonsellers who were not also users. However, differences between those who combined use and sales and those who only sold were not great; to the extent differences existed, they favored those who were involved in both use and sales. Taking the findings regarding drug use, drug sales, and gun activity together, it seems that dealers, addicts, and drugs were common and, in many instances, highly influential pieces in the illicit firearms market of the respondents. Judged by the findings from the study's selected samples, the street economy is not made up of specialists so much as of a generalized commerce in illegal goods wherein guns, drugs, and other illicit commodities are bought, sold, and traded.

Gangs and guns

The notion of a link between gangs and gun-related violence is common in most discussions of crime in the Nation's urban centers. Part of the problem with assessing the accuracy of this perception is the difficulty encountered in classifying the many forms that gangs take. Since the present study was not directed specifically at this issue, it is not possible to resolve the problem fully here. However, it was possible to classify gangs broadly through use of variables central to most discussions of gang typology and actual research on gangs.[5]

Typologies aside, it must be stressed that the gang members mentioned in this report derive from *selected* samples of juvenile gang members who are also sufficiently serious offenders to merit confinement in maximum security facilities as well as gang members who are also students in inner-city high schools with established problems of violence.

For the present study gangs are classified into three general types:

- Quasi-gang—a group with whom the respondent identifies but does not define as an organized gang.
- Unstructured gang—a group that is considered an organized gang by the respondent but that has fewer than 10 members or has few of the trappings normally associated with gangs (e.g., an "official" name, an "official" leader, regular meetings, designated clothing, and a specified turf).
- Structured gang—a group that is considered an organized gang by the respondent, has at least 10 members, and has at least 4 of the trappings normally associated with gangs. A total of 68 percent of the inmates and 22 percent of the students were affiliated with a gang or quasi-gang.

As with the relation between drugs and guns, it is important to note that substantial portions of the samples who were not affiliated with gangs were heavily involved in gun-related activity. However, for the inmates and to a lesser extent the students as well, movement from nongang member to member of a gang was associated with increases in possessing and carrying guns. Overall, structured and unstructured gang members differed little in relation to these variables. Both exceeded quasi-gang members in gun possession and carrying. Among inmates, for example, 81 percent of both types reported ownership of a revolver; 75 percent of structured gang members and 72 percent of unstructured gang members reported owning an automatic or semiautomatic handgun. Corresponding figures for quasi-gang members were slightly lower—70 percent and 65 percent, respectively.

Of some special interest, findings from both samples indicate that members of structured gangs were less likely than members of unstructured gangs (for students, even less than those of quasi-gangs) to possess military-style rifles. The preferred (or, at least, most commonly owned) weapon for respondents of both samples was the revolver, although ownership of military-style weapons among gang-affiliated inmates was quite widespread, averaging 53 percent across gang types.

Implications

- *Owning and carrying guns are fairly common behaviors among segments of the juvenile population—in the present study, among youth with records of serious crime and among students in troubled inner-city schools.* Fifty-five percent of the inmate respondents carried a gun routinely before being incarcerated. Twelve percent of the students carried a gun routinely. Thus, while these behaviors were by no means universal, least of all among the students surveyed, neither were they rare.
- *Perhaps the most striking finding is the quality of firearms these youth possessed.* They were well-made, easy to shoot, accurate, reliable firearms. Whether a matter of accessibility or preference, the most likely owned gun of either sample was a hand weapon (automatic or not) of large caliber. At the time of their incarceration, 55 percent of the inmate respondents owned automatic or semiautomatic handguns; 35 percent owned military-style automatic rifles. Comparable figures for the student sample were 18 and 6 percent, respectively.
- *For the majority of respondents, self-protection in a hostile and violent world was the chief reason to own and carry a gun.* Drug use and sales are seriously implicated in the youth-gun problem, but, at least with respect to the respondents in this study, to characterize either as directly causal is likely incorrect. The same may be said of the association between gangs and guns. While the link is apparent, it is not at all clear whether gangs *cause* gun use or whether they simply offer safety and a sense of belonging to youth who are already well acquainted with guns and perceive the need for them.

To the extent a violent social world prevails for people like those in the selected samples, the preference for high-quality, powerful firearms should not be surprising. Given the evidently heavy flow of firearms of all sorts through the respondents'

communities, guns of this type will ultimately find favor among both perpetrators and their possible victims. To the extent that antiviolence policy departs from changing the general social conditions that make arms-possession seem necessary and even desirable to juveniles, policy by necessity leans toward dissuading youth from pursuing so many and such lethal weapons. In this vein, the study findings shed some light on the potential for curbing youth violence through controlling gun distribution at the point of retail sale.

- *The handgun (and, secondarily, the shotgun) was the most commonly owned firearm among the respondents.* Much of the recent policy debate over firearms has concerned the wisdom of banning sales (and ownership) of military-style combat rifles to the general public. More than a third of the inmate respondents (though only 1 in 20 students) claimed to have possessed such a weapon at the time they were incarcerated. Yet it would seem highly specialized assault rifles are generally ill-suited for the day-to-day business of self-protection and crime. Outfitted with high-capacity magazines or clips, these weapons are bulky, relatively hard to handle, and very difficult to conceal on the street. Further, the firepower such weapons represent would rarely be in demand. For most offensive *and* defensive purposes, hand weapons are better suited.

- *Controls imposed at the point of retail sale likely would be ineffective, at least by themselves, in preventing the acquisition of guns by juveniles studied here because they rarely obtain their guns through such customary outlets.* Indeed, most of the methods of obtaining guns reported by the juveniles are already against the law. Informal commerce in small arms involving purchases and trades among private parties (most likely family members and friends) is difficult to regulate, is exploited by juveniles as well as adults to obtain guns, and successfully subverts legal measures designed to prevent guns from falling into the wrong hands. In the final analysis, the problem may not be that the appropriate laws do not exist but that the laws that do exist apparently are not or cannot be enforced, and that persons involved in firearms transactions with juveniles are not concerned with the legality of the transaction.

- *Judging by the present findings, handguns of all types, and even military-style rifles, are readily available through theft from legitimate sources and can be had at relatively little cost.* Again judging by the present findings, theft seems a major avenue by which guns enter the black market. Most of the inmate respondents, for example, had stolen guns themselves, though most had purchased or traded for the gun they owned at the time they were incarcerated. If theft is indeed such an important piece of the gun-supply puzzle, the approximately 72 million handguns currently possessed by legitimate private owners represent a potentially rich source for criminal handgun acquisition.

- *Therefore, an effective gun ownership policy, of necessity, must confront the issue of firearms theft.* At a minimum, there should be programs to educate the gun-owning public concerning the importance of securing their firearms.

Ultimately, from the viewpoint of policy, it may matter less where juveniles get their guns than where they get the idea that it is acceptable to use them. The problem is less one of getting guns out of the hands of juveniles and more one of reducing motivations (for the sample, primarily self-preservation) for youth to arm themselves in the first place. Convincing juveniles not to own, carry, and use guns will therefore require convincing them that they can survive in their neighborhoods without being armed.

Notes

1. Altschuler, D., and P. Brounstein. 1991. "Patterns of Drug Use, Drug Trafficking and Other Delinquency Among Inner City Adolescent Males in Washington, DC." *Criminology* 29:589–621. See also Cernkovich, S., P. Giordano, and M. Pugh. 1985. "Chronic Offenders: The Missing Cases in Self-Report Delinquency Research." *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 76:705–32.

2. Anderson, A.B., A. Basilevsky, and D. Hum. 1983. "Missing Data: A Review of the Literature." In *Handbook of Survey Research*, P. Rossi, J. Wright, and A. Anderson, eds. New York: Academic Press. 415–94.

3. Chaiken, J.M., and M.R. Chaiken. 1990. "Drugs and Predatory Crime." In *Drugs and Crime*, M. Tonry and J.Q. Wilson, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 203–39.

4. Akers, R. 1992. *Drugs, Alcohol, and Society*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth. Goode, E. 1989. *Drugs in American Society, 3rd Edition*. New York: Knopf.

5. Curry, G.D., and I.A. Spergel. 1988. "Gang Homicide, Delinquency and Community." *Criminology* 26:381–405. Fagan, J. 1990. "Social Processes of Delinquency and Drug Use among Urban Gangs." In *Gangs in America*, C. R. Huff, ed. Newbury Park, California: Sage. 183–219. Klein, M.W., and C.L. Maxson. 1989. "Street Gang Violence." In *Violent Crime, Violent Criminals*, N.A. Weiner and M.E. Wolfgang, eds. Newbury Park, California: Sage. 198–234. Morash, M. 1983. "Gangs, Groups, and Delinquency." *British Journal of Criminology* 23:309–35.

6. See Beck, A., S. Kline, and L. Greenfeld. 1988. *Survey of Youth in Custody, 1987*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics. Fagan, J., E. Piper, and M. Moore. 1986. "Violent Delinquents and Urban Youths." *Criminology* 24:439–71. Fagan, J., E. Piper, and Y. Cheng. 1987. "Contributions of Victimization to Delinquency in Inner Cities." *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 78:586–613. Wright, J.D., and P. Rossi. 1986. *Armed and Considered Dangerous*. Hawthorne, New York: Aldine. Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1988. *Profile of State Prison Inmates, 1986*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

7. See Fagan, J., E. Piper, and M. Moore. 1986. "Violent Delinquents and Urban Youths." *Criminology* 24:439–71. Fagan, J., E. Piper, and Y. Cheng. 1987. "Contributions of Victimization to Delinquency in Inner Cities." *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 78:586–613.

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